

Structural Vulnerabilities of Networked Insurgencies: Adapting to the New Adversary

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The ongoing conflict in Iraq has sparked a renewed interest in the study of counterinsurgency, leading many to comb the wars of the twentieth century, the “golden age of insurgencies,” for lessons that can be applied to today.¹ Much of this recent analysis has focused on the knowledge gained from fighting Marxist revolutionaries.

The insurgent of today, however, is not the Maoist of yesterday. His organization and methods are strikingly different from his twentieth century predecessors. The modern insurgent aims to defeat his opponent by psychological warfare and terrorism instead of military action.² He draws his support from criminal networks as opposed to popular mobilization. He fights a netwar not a People’s War.

These dissimilarities raise the question of just how much of twentieth century counterinsurgency thought can be applied to twenty-first century conflicts. Methods from past wars are put forth as guiding principles with only a nod towards these differences.³ Applying these principles without examination could lead, at best, to wasted effort, at worst, to defeat.

Sun Tzu said, “Know your enemy.”⁴ The structure of a movement, meaning its organization and methods, is the key to understanding it. Modern and Maoist insurgencies are structurally different. In order to be effective, those conducting counterinsurgencies must take into consideration these differences and adapt their methods to the structure of modern adversaries.

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This article examines the distinction between Maoist and modern insurgencies and the implications for counterinsurgency methods. First, it contrasts the two types of insurgencies in terms of their organizations and strategies. Building on that information, it analyzes the vulnerabilities of Maoist and modern insurgencies in their organization, political cohesion, support base, and use of information technology. From this analysis, it draws conclusions about how to modify twentieth century methods to combat the modern insurgent.

The purpose of this article is not to propose a comprehensive strategy for a modern counterinsurgency. Instead, it examines one component of such a plan—understanding and exploiting the insurgent's structural vulnerabilities. It does not exhaust this analysis; the conclusions drawn here are demonstrative of the possibilities inherent in this methodology.

Throughout this article, the conflict in Iraq is used as an illustrative example of a modern insurgency. The Iraqi insurgency is thus far the most advanced embodiment of netwar, where small groups coordinate, communicate, and conduct their campaigns in an internetted manner, without a precise central command.⁵ As such, this conflict is a powerful predictor of the future of insurgency.

Structure of the Maoist and Iraqi Insurgencies

The first step in learning to defeat this new netwar adversary is to understand how its structure differs from past movements. The following contrasts the organization and strategy of the Maoist and Iraqi insurgencies.

Organization

The last half of the twentieth century witnessed the appearance of several effective revolutionary movements based on Mao's strategy of the People's War.⁶ Examples include the Hukbalahap in the Philippines, the Malaya Races Liberation Army (MRLA) in Malaya, and the Viet Cong in Vietnam.

These groups were all organized in similar hierarchies.⁷ For example, at the head of the Viet Cong was the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), a committee composed of the top political and military leaders. Below the COSVN were six regional committees, each of which oversaw several provincial and district offices. At the district level was an extensive support organiza-

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tion including medical personnel, weapon manufacturers, training teams, and fiscal auditors. At the lowest level, the cadres organized the entire population to support the movement. Armed bodies consisted of main force units, local guerrillas, and village militias. These military units were fully integrated with the political hierarchy, giving the Viet Cong tight organizational control.⁸

In contrast, the Iraqi insurgency is a constantly shifting network of disparate organizations.⁹ There are currently three main armed groups: *Tandhim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (al Qaeda's Organization in Mesopotamia), *Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna* (Partisans of the Sunna Army), and *al-Jaysh al-Islami fil-'Iraq* (The Islamic Army in Iraq). There are also a number of smaller groups.¹⁰ The International Crisis Group has suggested that each of these is “more a loose network of factions involving a common ‘trademark’ than a fully integrated organization.”¹¹ Each group is composed of many small, compartmented or autonomous cells, some as small as two or three people.¹² Many cells specialize in one particular function, such as mortar attacks, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, assassinations, surveillance, or kidnappings.¹³ These groups’ relationships are very fluid. As Bruce Hoffman described:

In this loose, ambiguous, and constantly shifting environment, constellations of cells or collections of individuals gravitate toward one another to carry out armed attacks, exchange intelligence, trade weapons, or engage in joint training and then disperse at times never to operate together again.¹⁴

In contrast to the Maoist hierarchy, this network of insurgent factions has no central leadership.¹⁵ For this loose organization, consultation, coordination and consensus must substitute for central direction. But far more than simple coordination is required if these organizations are to be effective. Networks need what John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt called shared narrative and doctrine to maintain their cohesion and focus.¹⁶ The narrative is the story the network tells to communicate a sense of cause, purpose, and mission and to engender a sense of identity and belonging among members of the network and potential recruits.¹⁷ The insurgents’ narrative centers on the fact they are patriotic and pious freedom fighters battling to expel a foreign occupier and overthrow an illegitimate regime. By simultaneously emphasizing nationalism and Islamism, this narrative offers something for everyone and bonds groups who have little in common.¹⁸

Shared doctrine enables the network to operate in an integrated manner without central control.¹⁹ For example, the insurgents share information about IED operations: techniques, tactics, enemy vulnerabilities, and target priorities. This allows groups acting independently to conduct IED attacks in a coherent pattern.²⁰ In short, the insurgents “compensate for lack of [central leadership] by emphasizing operational and ideological cohesion.”²¹

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Beyond narrative and doctrine, there is another element to the cohesion of the insurgency, information technology. The ubiquity of cellular telephones and computers is largely what makes networked organizations possible.²² The insurgency is particularly dependent on the internet for communication and organization.²³ This is discussed more fully below, but it is important to keep in mind that information technology is not simply an aid to a network; it is essential to its functioning.

Strategies

Much of the growth and success of Marxist revolutionaries in the twentieth century was due to the effectiveness of Mao’s insurgent strategy found in the People’s War.²⁴ This was a sophisticated program to build an insurgency step-by-step. First, the movement focused on intensive underground political activities to build a base of support. It developed a comprehensive political program that highlighted grievances with the government and made detailed promises of a better future under the revolutionaries. This program was the key weapon of the insurgency, because Mao realized that any revolution was primarily a political contest.²⁵ Next, the insurgents conducted guerrilla actions in a targeted area. Police and security forces were attacked. Government officials were assassinated or forced to flee. The aim was to destroy government control of the region, leaving a power vacuum for the insurgents. The insurgency then integrated the area into the movement; the population, either by persuasion or coercion, provided recruits, supplies, and cooperation. Using this strategy, the movement slowly expanded. Eventually, when the insurgent forces grew strong enough, the government could be defeated by conventional means.²⁶

The Iraqi strategy differs from the Maoist People’s War on almost every point. First, there is no preliminary political mobilization.²⁷ In fact, the Iraqi movement is characterized by a lack of any political program related to the future of the country. This is a deliberate strategy of the insurgency in an attempt to avoid divisive issues.²⁸ Second, the Iraqis do not conduct large-scale guerrilla operations. Viet Cong main force units usually fought in battalion strength or greater, independent guerrilla units in company strength.²⁹ Iraqis often operate in

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groups as small as three men and rarely more than 50.³⁰ Third, the Iraqi insurgency does not seek to control territory. The lesson it learned from the siege of Fallujah in 2004 was not to fight from a static position. Finally, the Iraqis do not aspire to win a conventional military victory. Their strategy is to maintain a barrage of terrorist attacks on coalition forces, the Iraqi government, and collaborators, with the goal of inflicting enough casualties to cause the Coalition to withdraw and the government to cease to function.³¹ As Thomas Hammes stated, the insurgent’s strategy is to “destroy the enemy’s political will.”³²

Destruction Versus Disruption

Attacking the insurgent organization directly is an important element of any comprehensive strategy. Counterinsurgencies against Maoists often aimed to destroy the leadership hierarchy. One example is the Phoenix Program instituted in Vietnam. This effort attempted to neutralize the Viet Cong by attacking its hierarchy in the hamlets and villages. Police and intelligence units worked to identify and arrest insurgent cadres.³³

A Maoist organization was particularly vulnerable to this type of attack. The leadership hierarchy, from the central committee down to the cadres in the villages, ran the movement and directed all its operations. The cadre strength in each village was often as few as 10 or 20 men. Destroying a part of the hierarchy would cripple insurgency in a given area.³⁴

The United States is following a similar strategy in Iraq. US intelligence assigns each insurgent leader a position in a tiered structure. A great amount of effort is directed toward capturing or eliminating this leadership.³⁵

But a networked organization, like the Iraqi insurgency, is very resilient to this type of attack. First, as previously mentioned, this type of organization has no leadership hierarchy. Targeting a leader may impact his subgroup or cell, but will not degrade the movement as a whole. Second, as Luther Gerlach explained in his study of networked organizations, often people who are perceived by outsiders as leaders are more accurately described as “traveling evangelists.”³⁶ They energize and encourage the movement and often help with

recruiting and organizing, but they are not operational directors. As a result, eliminating them will not destroy the movement.³⁷ Third, a network can sustain significant damage and continue to function. The self-organizing quality of a network allows it to make new connections and work around the injury. To destroy a network requires eliminating a large number of its individual nodes.³⁸

Attacking the perceived insurgency leadership, while it could have a positive propaganda value, is unlikely to have a decisive effect.³⁹ A better paradigm for a counterinsurgency strategy may be found in studying law enforcement operations against criminal organizations. Criminal networks, like insurgencies, are very hard to completely eradicate. Law enforcement strategies, therefore, often focus on disrupting the network's ability to function rather than its destruction.⁴⁰

A network's vulnerability to disruption lies in what netwar expert Phil Williams calls critical nodes. A critical node is a person or cell whose function has a "high level of importance and a low level of redundancy."⁴¹ This could mean a person with an important but rare skill. For example, British intelligence believes that there are only a handful of bombmakers producing the bulk of the IEDs.⁴² Or, it could mean a node which serves as the sole link between two organizations. Although these individuals may not be high-ranking, they play a vital role in the network, and their elimination will degrade the insurgency's ability to operate more than the removal of its ostensible leadership. This understanding is key to combating a networked insurgency. A network may be hard to destroy, but it can be disrupted.⁴³

Political Vulnerabilities

Every insurgency espouses a political program of some sort to explain its actions and attract supporters. Maoists carefully crafted their political agenda to fit the local circumstances. Usually, it was based, in part, on real grievances and carefully incorporated the hopes and fears of the local population.⁴⁴ Because of the ideological discipline of the Maoist insurgents, fracturing the movement by attacking its political agenda was generally not productive. Instead, the standard counterinsurgency response was to create an alternative political program which addressed the underlying grievances of the population. Typically, reforms, political concessions, and economic development were all part of the government's program. In this way, the government competed with the insurgency for the loyalty of the people.⁴⁵

All this is certainly applicable and needed in Iraq. The Iraqi insurgency, however, does not have the political cohesion of its Maoist predecessor. The movement is a loose coalition of groups with widely divergent tenets and goals. There are a number of potentially divisive issues, among them ideology.

The insurgency is balanced between nationalism and Islamic extremism. Of the three main armed groups, al Qaeda's Organization in Mesopotamia is most closely associated with Islamic extremism. On the other hand, the Islamic Army in Iraq is more nationalist in outlook.⁴⁶ Internally, each organization is a mix of groups representing a spectrum of ideologies.⁴⁷ To achieve cohesion, the insurgency has focused on a middle ground emphasizing patriotism and Salafism. The appeal to patriotism attracts the secular nationalists. The emphasis on Salafism appeals to the Islamists, while not repelling the nationalists. Salafism is not a political program; rather it demands correct personal conduct.⁴⁸

To hold this dissimilar coalition together, any discussion of events beyond expelling the Coalition and toppling the government is carefully avoided.⁴⁹ On the one hand, *Tandhim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* is affiliated with al Qaeda, which is committed to establishing a caliphate in the region. In contrast, another group took great pains to state that, although no political agenda had been articulated, its program definitely did not include an Islamic government in Iraq.⁵⁰

These issues are potential cracks in the shared narrative that holds the movement together. Further cracks showed when the insurgency tried responding to political initiatives by the government. For example, the January 2005 elections forced the insurgency to state a position. But there was no mutual agreement about how to respond: some groups threatened to attack voters, others urged a boycott. The result was chaos which damaged the insurgency's standing with the populace.⁵¹

These examples demonstrate the limitations of the narrative as a means of cohesion. As long as the network confronts issues that are within the shared story of the narrative, it can maintain its unity. If issues outside the narrative arise, however, such as the elections or an agenda for the future of Iraq, the network loses its cohesion as groups respond according to their own ideology. The network may be capable of reaching a consensus, but this takes time.⁵² This disjointedness demonstrates that the political cohesion of a networked insurgency is directly vulnerable in a way the Maoist revolutionaries were not.

Separating the Insurgent From Support

All insurgencies need access to resources, among them recruits, money, supplies, and weapons.⁵³ An important consideration for counterinsurgencies is to understand how the insurgent obtains these necessities. The Maoist strategy requires occupying territory and eventually conventional warfare, which in turn requires large armed forces. To build these forces and

maintain them in the field demands large quantities of recruits and supplies. The insurgency gains these resources by controlling the population, which is often coerced into providing people and resources to the movement. For example, as Professor Walter Davison wrote in 1968, “The Viet Cong treated villages under their control . . . primarily as sources of manpower, rice, and money with which to carry on the war.”⁵⁴

The heart of many counterinsurgency strategies is an attempt to physically separate the insurgent from this base of support. The British executed what is arguably the most sophisticated and most successful version of this strategy while fighting the MRLA. Chinese squatters, the base of support for the MRLA, were systematically moved into fortified New Villages, where they could be both protected and watched. Strict controls were put on the movement of people, food, and other supplies. In this way, the British successfully interdicted the flow of materials and recruits to the MRLA. A primary reason for the surrender of MRLA guerrillas was hunger.⁵⁵

The success of the British strategy in Malaya and other similar efforts have caused some to call for applying these methods in Iraq.⁵⁶ A population control strategy is not likely to be effective against the Iraqi insurgency because it does not depend as directly on the population as its Maoist predecessors.

First, the Iraqi insurgency needs far less manpower. Unlike the Maoists, its strategy does not call for controlling territory or conventional warfare; it does not require large guerrilla forces. The insurgency can meet all its personnel needs through volunteers or by hiring criminals or the unemployed.⁵⁷ Second, the Iraqi insurgents are dispersed and living among the general population in an urban environment, often at home with their families. The movement does not need to supply large guerrilla units in remote areas. Food and other supplies can be purchased openly—vendors may not even know they are selling to insurgents. Strategies that aim to prevent the insurgency from controlling or coercing the population in order to cut off manpower and supplies are not likely to be effective, simply because the Iraqi groups do not need to control or coerce the population to obtain their needs.

Instead, an effective counterinsurgency strategy should understand the sources of support. The Iraqi insurgency has at least three separate means of financing its cause: former regime leaders, overseas fundraising, and criminal activities.

A major source of funding for the insurgency comes from outside Iraq. This includes former regime officials and groups from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. One insurgent financier was captured with \$35 million and access to over \$2 billion worth of monetary assets stolen from the former Iraqi regime.⁵⁸

Crime has become a major source of funding. For example, kidnapping is a lucrative business for the insurgency, with the average ransom being set at \$25,000. Oil smuggling is also profitable, with an estimated \$200,000 worth of oil stolen each day.⁵⁹ It appears that some cells have become specialized in criminal activities, with one cell for example, handling only kidnappings.⁶⁰ If so, these may be prime examples of critical nodes.

The criminal connections of the insurgency are both a strength and a weakness. Having independent sources for funding gives the insurgent independence and flexibility.⁶¹ However, criminal associations may also cause a backlash against the movement.⁶² To be effective, a counterinsurgency should aim to sever the connections between the insurgency and its sources of funding. Traditional population controls will not do this.

Information Technology Vulnerabilities

One of the ways that a network such as the Iraqi insurgency departs from its hierarchical predecessors is its dependence on information technology. It is important to understand that this technology is not simply a communication tool; in large part, it is what makes a networked organization possible.

All the insurgent groups use the internet as a primary means of communication. Many groups publish daily bulletins, either on their web sites or through mass emailing.⁶³ Their skillful use of the internet allows them to attract support and recruits by directly communicating with the Iraqi populace and the world in a manner that was not previously possible. In the past, groups had to rely on newspapers or television to spread their message.⁶⁴

Information technology, however, is not simply about better communications. By massively reducing the costs and time required to communicate and increasing the sheer volume of information that can be transmitted, information technology makes dispersed networked organizations possible.⁶⁵ The Iraqi insurgent groups use the internet to coordinate actions, share tactical lessons, establish objectives, plan operations, and synchronize policy.⁶⁶ This is in stark contrast with a Maoist organization which needs an extensive hierarchy to coordinate its activities.

The United States appears to be targeting insurgent internet sites and is presumably attempting to monitor internet communications. The insurgents have become very adept at countering these efforts, for example, using email lists to replace deactivated web sites.⁶⁷ Given the dependence of a networked organization on information technology, this is a vulnerability which should be exploited more fully.

The Way Ahead

A modern, networked insurgency, such as the one in Iraq, is structurally very different from the Maoist movements of the twentieth century. Simply rehashing old strategies will not work. An effective counterinsurgency needs to understand the structure of this new insurgency and adapt its strategies accordingly.

The first step is to understand that the enemy is a network, not a hierarchy. Imposing a hierarchical framework on an amorphous organization will only hinder efforts.⁶⁸ As Georgetown University's Professor Bruce Hoffman writes, "The problem in Iraq is that there appears to be no such static wiring diagram or organizational structure to identify, unravel, and systematically dismantle."⁶⁹

The next step is to understand that networks are very difficult to destroy, but they can be disrupted. As Dr. Steven Metz and Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Millen stated, operations should focus on "fracturing, delinking, and deresourcing" the insurgency.⁷⁰ Several avenues for disrupting the insurgent network have been discussed in this article—critical nodes, narrative, support sources, and information technology.

First, attack critical nodes for maximum disruptive effect. Modern insurgencies do not have a hierarchy that can be pulled apart. Targeting the ostensible leadership is not likely to have a significant disruptive effect. People or cells with special skills or who act as critical communication links or perform non-redundant functions are key vulnerabilities of a network.

Second, networked insurgencies do not necessarily have strong political cohesion. Attack the narrative by forcing the insurgency to respond to issues that are outside its scope—this can disrupt or even fracture the movement as each group responds to the issue according to its own ideology. Ideological differences are a primary cause of fracturing within networked groups.⁷¹ A counterinsurgency should take every opportunity to disrupt its adversary by promoting internal dissension.

Third, attack the sources of support. This cannot be done effectively through traditional population control measures; the counterinsurgency must understand where the movement obtains its resources. This may involve international cooperation to stop overseas funding streams. Given that insurgencies are increasingly turning to crime for financing, priority should be given to reducing crime and corruption in an effort to disrupt insurgent financing.⁷²

Fourth, attack the information technology infrastructure of the network. A network is absolutely dependent on robust communications to function. It may be that information technology controls are the modern equivalent

of the population controls that were used so successfully against Maoist insurgencies. One extreme proposal is to completely shut down the information technology grid in the insurgent areas—telephones, cellular towers, and so on. This could certainly have a disruptive effect on a networked organization, but more research is needed in this critical area.

The rich history of twentieth century counterinsurgency is a tempting source for those struggling to develop strategies against the modern insurgent. Certainly there are valuable lessons from these conflicts. However, the successful strategies of that era were all based on a detailed understanding of the enemy. To win against a modern insurgency, we need have an equally firm understanding of our adversary and not mistake him for something else.

NOTES

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